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*Family violence against
women with disabilities*

F18 Information from ...

The National Clearinghouse on Family Violence

Family Violence Against Women with Disabilities

What Is Family Violence?

Family violence, in this context, refers to physical, psychological or sexual maltreatment, abuse or neglect of a woman with disabilities by a relative or caregiver. It is a violation of trust and an abuse of power in a relationship where a woman should have the right to absolute safety. In many cases, it is also a crime.

Violence Against Women

Violence against women is acknowledged as a pervasive and serious problem in today's society. Women are abused simply because they are women. Statistics for the general population indicate the following:

- one woman in four is sexually abused by age 16;¹

- two women in three are victims of unwanted sexual acts;²
- one woman in six is physically or sexually abused by her husband, ex-husband or live-in partner;³
- over 60% of female homicides are due to family violence;⁴ and
- 14.7% of women in the general population have disabilities.⁵

In both the disabled and non-disabled communities, most abuse is inflicted by a person known to the victim. In both communities, 95% of victims of spousal assault are women,⁶ and at least 89% of abusers are men.⁷ More disabled men are abused than are non-disabled men. The incidence of abuse is 20% or higher in the developmentally disabled and deaf community.⁸

What Makes Women with Disabilities Particularly Vulnerable to Family Violence?

Probably the single biggest factor affecting the incidence of family violence against women with disabilities is the extent of these women's "families". Women with disabilities must often depend on a variety of people to provide them with assistance in carrying out their everyday lives. For this reason, their "family" is understood to include not only parents, husbands, boyfriends and other relatives, but also friends, neighbours and caregivers. Caregivers can include attendants, interpreters, homemakers, drivers, doctors, nurses, teachers, social workers, psychiatrists, therapists, counsellors, and workers in hospitals and other institutions. This large number of people and the intimate physical and emotional contact involved in the care they provide, greatly increase the risk of abuse to persons with disabilities.

Women who live in institutional settings, and women who are multiply or profoundly disabled, are most vulnerable to abuse because they are more dependent upon even larger numbers of people, and less able to get away. **It is estimated that women with disabilities are 1.5 to 10 times as likely to be abused as non-disabled women, depending on whether they live in the community or in institutions.**⁹

While a disability can make it more difficult for a woman to escape or report abuse, social attitudes towards persons with disabilities are probably a bigger factor in her increased vulnerability to violence. The way in which society views persons with disabilities handicaps these women in many ways:

- they tend to be viewed and treated as children, as lacking intelligence;
- they may be trained to be compliant and are sometimes punished for assertiveness or for challenging authority figures. This is in direct contrast to the street-proofing taught to many children in schools;
- women with disabilities are considered to be non-sexual and are often not given sex education, which can result in an inability to distinguish between abusive behaviour and normal or necessary forms of touching;
- they may be considered incompetent witnesses by police and the courts, particularly if they have difficulty or require assistance in communicating; and
- when they do report abuse, they may not be believed.¹⁰

Women with disabilities are vulnerable at all stages of their lives because they are women and because they have a disability. Growing old increases the likelihood of becoming disabled, which can increase the likelihood of abuse.¹¹

It should be noted that abuse can result in disability. Physical abuse can cause permanent physical damage.

"Disciplining" babies by shaking them is a major cause of brain injury and death in infants.¹² Women have cited violence by husbands as causing loss of vision, and loss of mobility.¹³ All forms of abuse are emotionally traumatic and can leave psychological scars from which a victim never recovers.

Prevalence of Abuse

- Research has only just begun in this area, but indications are that women and children with disabilities are one of the most highly victimized groups in our society.
- A survey conducted in 1985 by DAWN Canada: DisAbled Women's Network found that violence and fear of violence were the most critical issues facing women with disabilities.¹⁴
- The degree of risk of sexual abuse of persons with disabilities "appears to be at least 150% of that for individuals of the same sex and similar age without disabilities".¹⁵
- It is estimated that only 20% of the cases of sexual abuse involving disabled people are ever reported to the police, community service agencies, or other authorities.¹⁶
- Two hundred and forty-five women with disabilities responded to DAWN Canada's 1988 Canada-wide questionnaire:

- 40% had been raped, abused or assaulted;
- 53% of women who had been disabled from birth or early childhood had been abused;
- women with multiple disabilities had experienced multiple abuse; and
- 10% of women who had been abused sought help from transition houses; only half of these women were accommodated.¹⁷

- One study suggests that we can expect to encounter significant disabilities in about one of every seven victims of child sexual abuse. This can be expected to increase as case reporting for children with disabilities improves.¹⁸

Barriers to Obtaining Help

It is extremely difficult for any abused woman to leave a situation of abuse. "A woman is hit by a husband or partner an average of 35 times before she calls the police."¹⁹ Battering undermines self-esteem and can make a woman feel she is somehow responsible for her own abuse. For a woman with a disability, this situation is even more difficult. She may be dependent on her abuser for affection, communication and financial, physical and medical support. If she reports the abuse, she may risk poverty and loss of housing. She may fear she will not be heard or believed if she speaks out. She may face further violence, institutionalization, or loss of her children if she seeks help. She may not

have access to information about existing support services for victims of violence. Even if she has this information, many sources of support may not be accessible. She may not be able to contact the police or women's shelters because they do not have communication devices such as Telecommunication Devices for the Deaf (TDDs). She may not be able to physically leave her situation because of a lack of accessible transportation. Her lack of options may leave her feeling so powerless and despairing that suicide seems the only viable choice. And if she seeks help in dealing with suicidal thoughts or attempts, she is unlikely to find counselling which takes account of her own reality. And so she is left isolated and possibly suicidal.

Forms of Violence

Violence against women with disabilities can take many forms, which can occur at the same time. It occurs not only as deliberate maltreatment and abuse, but also in the more passive form of neglect:

- neglect – denial of food, lack of or inappropriate personal or medical care;
- physical abuse – assault, rough or inappropriate handling, inappropriate personal or medical care, over-use of restraint, inappropriate behaviour modification, over-medication, confinement;

- psychological abuse – verbal abuse, intimidation, social isolation, emotional deprivation, denial of the right to make personal decisions, threat of having her children taken away;
- sexual abuse – denial of a woman's sexuality, denial of sexual information/education (eg. about birth control and childbirth), verbal harassment, unwanted sexual touching, assault, forced abortion or sterilization; and
- financial exploitation – denial of access to and control over her own funds, misuse of financial resources.

The Abuser

The abuser occupies and violates a position of power with respect to the victim. The abuser may:

- use authority over the victim to obtain "consent" for sexual contact;
- attempt to justify sexual abuse by rationalizing that he is doing the victim a favour because nobody else would be sexually interested in her;
- threaten the victim with violence or death if she tells anyone;
- use the victim's disability or difficulty in communicating to discredit her story if she tells; and
- is more likely to be believed than the victim, particularly if he is in a position of authority.

How We Can Work Towards Eliminating Abuse

Violence against vulnerable individuals and groups is a systemic problem. Preventing family violence will require fundamental changes in societal attitudes. People need to learn to appreciate differences, to value other people as equals, and become responsible partners in our common community.

There are many changes needed to improve the present situation for women with disabilities who are victims of violence:

- abusive behaviour needs to be acknowledged as a serious social and in some cases criminal problem, rather than being considered a private matter;²⁰
- protocols need to be developed for institutions to screen potential employees and volunteers;
- protocols need to be developed to address the abuse that occurs in institutional settings;
- community living alternatives need to be made available for women with disabilities;
- courses need to be made accessible and available to women with disabilities (eg., in self-defense, assertiveness training, and sex education).

- appropriate suicide counselling which meets the special needs of women with disabilities needs to be made available;
- transition houses and other existing support services need to be made accessible, and frontline workers in shelter facilities need to be sensitized to the needs of women with disabilities;
- women with disabilities need to be hired to provide this training and to work in these centres; and
- women in all communities need to work together to develop a co-ordinated approach to dealing with the abuse of all women.

What You Can Do to Help

- Become part of the solution.
- Explore your own neighbourhood and find out what services are available and accessible.
- Work towards increasing accessibility.
- Listen to and take seriously any person who says she is being abused.
- Pay attention to any situation that might be abusive and be available to listen and act if your help is required.
- If you know of someone who is being abused, find a safe way to remove her from the situation she finds dangerous.
- Offer whatever support she needs, whether it be listening, helping with childcare, providing transportation, or other assistance.

Where to Go to Get Help

If you are a woman with a disability and you are being abused in any way, you need support. Get in touch with a women's transition house, battered women's support group, or rape crisis centre in your community. If there isn't one, call your local DAWN branch.

Another option is to contact a consumer group for persons with disabilities. In addition, there are fourteen Independent Living Centres across Canada that may be of assistance. Call a legal clinic, a lawyer, or the police.

Ask for help, and make sure you get it.

Suggested Reading

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